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The Organization of Pessimism: Profane Illumination and Anthropological Materialism in Walter Benjamin

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Abstract. This paper explores Walter Benjamin's relationship with French Surrealism from sources rarely studied or practically unknown until now. First, I will set out the direct link between the theses on "profane illumination" and the "organization of pessimism" in *Der Surrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz*, and various texts by Pierre Naville, one of the most active figures in the Surrealist movement between 1925 and 1929. Second, I will consider Benjamin's commentaries in *Pariser Passagen* <I> and convolute "S" of the *Passagen-Werk* about Surrealist writings and Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, flagging up the implications of this confrontation for Benjamin's ideas of secularization of mysticism and messianism. Lastly, I will seek to refine the meaning of Benjamin's "anthropological materialism" and its relevance to those sections of the *Passagenarbeit* that are dedicated to the evolution of social movements since the French Revolution.

Key words. Pierre Naville, Surrealist illumination, Secularization of mysticism, Nihilism, Martin Heidegger.

In memoriam Karlheinz Barck

In a letter to Gershom Scholem, written in Berlin at the end of October 1928, Walter Benjamin said: «To cleanse the work [the *Passagenarbeit*] of its ostentatious proximity to the Surrealist movement, that, understandable and well-founded as it may be, could become disastrous for me, I have had to expand it more and more in my mind, and make it so universal within its most particular and minute framework that it might take possession of the legacy of Surrealism, albeit in purely temporal terms, and with all the command of a philosophical Fortinbras» (Benjamin [1925-1930]: 622, 420)¹. Ben-

¹ All translated quotations that appeared in this paper both from German and

jamin's first assessment of this legacy came, in the months that followed, in the form of his essay *Der Surrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz*, published in "Die literarische Welt" in February 1929. Much more elaborate than *Traumkitsch* (1926-1927), which was dedicated to the analysis of *Répétitions* (1922) by Paul Éluard, with drawings by Max Ernst, of André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) and of Louis Aragon's *Une vague de rêves* (1924), this second work on the movement expanded Benjamin's bibliography significantly, and aspired to be, as we see in the preliminary remarks, a «dialectical critique of Surrealism» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1037, 1039). In other words, if *Der Surrealismus*, as Benjamin comments in letters of the same period, represented a form of introduction or «an opaque paravent» in front of the *Passagenarbeit* (Benjamin, [1925-1930]: 630, 472), then this was because the text set out for the first time the fundamental framework of what, referring to *Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX Jahrhunderts* (1934), Benjamin would characterize as «the philosophical exploitation of Surrealism and, as such, its *Aufhebung*» (Benjamin [1935-1937]: 978, 138).

In the second paragraph of *Der Surrealismus*, Benjamin places the discussion on the legacy of the movement under a triple historic-conceptual lighting. First, he asserts that the German observer is long «acquainted with the crisis of the intelligentsia or, more precisely, with that of the humanistic concept of freedom»; he maintains, in addition, that a «frenetic determination» has become apparent in the context of this crisis «to step out of the stage of eternal discussions and come to a decision (*Entscheidung*) at any price»; finally, he refers to the extremely difficult position – that he can himself testify to – of left-wing intellectuals, grappling with the tension between «an anarchist *fronde* and a revolutionary discipline» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 295; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 207). In the following pages, I will seek to examine these three issues, as they are addressed in this essay, by relating them to other writings by Benjamin

and the surrealists' texts he refers to directly or indirectly. I intend especially to show, as thoroughly as I can, that the confrontation with the experience of Surrealism plays a preponderant role in Benjamin's thought that has not been clarified so far. My thesis is that his «dialectical critique of Surrealism» is neither limited to literary or artistic matters, nor to the methodology of the *Passagenarbeit* with respect to Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926)², but projects itself on his reflections regarding the political praxis and the philosophy of history.

First I shall refer to the relation between the theses on «profane illumination» and the «organization of pessimism» from Benjamin's essay, with some texts by Pierre Naville, then one of the most active figures of the Surrealist group, at the core of the internal debate on the relation between Surrealism and Marxism. Then I shall examine the opposition between Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and the writings of the Surrealists that Benjamin states in the notes of *Pariser Passagen < I >* and in his review of the book by Albert Béguin *L'âme romantique et les rêves* (1937), in the light of two questions in particular: the contemporary trends of nihilism and the secularization of mysticism. I shall conclude by taking as main theme a letter Benjamin addressed to Scholem in 1930, where Benjamin manifests his interest in the critical writings of the former Surrealist Emmanuel Berl in order to define the meaning of «anthropological materialism» in opposition to orthodox Marxism, on the one hand, and to the legacy of Romanticism and the French revolutionary movements of the Nineteenth Century, on the other hand.

² On Benjamin and Surrealism see Carchia [1986], Fürnkäs [1988], Cohen [1993], McCole [1993: 206-252], Lachaud [1994a], Barck [2006], Lowy [1996, 2000: 39-58; 2007; 2014], Lindner [2009] and the texts by Matthias Bickenbach, Roberto Calasso, Javier Cercas, Aris Fioretos, Lars Friedrich, Dirk Knipphals, Uwe Kolbe, Thomas Küpper, Burkhardt Lindner, Winfried Menninghaus, W. S. Merwin, Ingeborg Meyer-Palmedo, Anja Nowak, Wells Tower, Niels Werber, Nadine Werner and Irving Wohlfahrt collected in Kupper [2012]. See also Ibarlucía [1997a; 1997b; 1998].

1. SURREALIST ILLUMINATION AND ÉTAT DE FUREUR

After André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard and Benjamin Péret publicly pledged allegiance to the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), an important discussion took place inside the Surrealist movement: should the term “Surrealist” be avoided as the predicate of a social revolution of the Bolshevik kind, or, on the contrary, should it invoke a liberation of the “spirit” beyond all determined historico-political recognition? From the pages of “La Révolution surréaliste”, founded in December 1924, and the “Bureau des Recherches Surréalistes”, headed by Antonin Artaud, it was framed as an attack on social institutions – universities, the army, psychiatric hospitals, the Church of Rome – and called for a struggle that most members of the movement considered premature and incoherent. Convinced of the need to find a precise objective for the “Surrealist revolution”, some of its members set themselves the task of defining it. So it was that in March 1925, an «ideological committee» was created, whose first task consisted in calling a meeting to address an urgent question: «to decide whether or not the idea of revolution should be privileged over the Surrealist idea, whether one is a tributary of the other or whether the two run parallel» (Naville [1975]: 19). At the first session, Naville tried without success to rally support for the following declaration, included a year later in *La Révolution et les intellectuels* (1926):

Signatory members of “La Révolution surréaliste”, meeting on the 2nd of April 1925 with the aim of determining which of the two principles, Surrealist or revolutionary, is the most apt to direct its course of action, failed to reach an understanding on the issue, but have agreed on the following:

1. *That, above all Surrealist or revolutionary concerns, what prevails in its spirit is a certain state of furor.*
2. *We believe that only by way of this furor are we capable of reaching what might be called “Surrealist illumination”.*

3. *That one of our first aims is the elucidation of a number of points on which this furor is an attack.*

4. *We see only one positive aspect around which all members of “La Révolution surréaliste” should unite: knowledge that the Spirit is an essentially irreducible principle and one that cannot be fixed, either in life or beyond it. (ibid., 20-21, 73)*

The importance of this text for Benjamin’s interpretation of Surrealism has passed unnoticed: the notions of *illumination surréaliste* and *état de fureur* that appear here correspond with the notions of *profane Erleuchtung* and *Rausch* in the essay of 1929 (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 297, 308; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 209, 216; Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1038). In fact, *La Révolution et les intellectuels*, like Naville’s article *Mieux et moins bien* (1927), are the main sources for the second part of *Der Surrealismus*. Naville’s first writing, subtitled *Que peuvent faire les Surréalistes? Position de la question*, takes up the frustrated debate of the “ideological committee” in the first months of 1925 that led to the failure of the cooperation accord with *Clarté* and other groups allied with the PCF. Naville holds that the origin of Surrealism is «principally speculative»: it departs abstractly from anarchy like «a movement of revolt against all contemporary intellectual production» (Naville [1975]: 64). However, the «metaphysical position» its members tend to adopt derives partly from «the confusion into which they fall when they refuse to recognize that the intellectual force they claim, places them in the field of direct struggle» against the bourgeoisie, and that «it is likely in this field that such force will find its full use» (ibid., 70).

Underlining the need to clarify this «ambiguous intellectual and moral situation», Naville suggests two possible ways forward: «to persevere in a negative stance of anarchic order, a false or *a priori* stance that does not justify the idea of revolution» invoked by Surrealism, or else «to commit themselves fully to the revolutionary route, the only revolutionary route: the Marxist route» (ibid., 76-77). In other words, the dilemma would be as follows: «do Surrealists believe in libera-

tion of the spirit, before the abolition of the bourgeois conditions of material life and, to a certain extent, independent of them, or, on the contrary, does the abolition of the bourgeois conditions of material life constitute a necessary condition for the liberation of the spirit?» (ibid., 85). By way of various artistic, literary and pseudo-mystical practices, the Surrealists have developed «an entirely romantic experience of things» (ibid., 86) that keeps the movement effortlessly tied to the bourgeois sphere. Nonetheless, if according to its own “dialectic” Surrealism chooses to yield to the revolution, it must free itself of this burden and join in with «the *disciplined* action of class struggle» (ibid., 77) in such a way that, aligning itself with the Third International and Bolshevik politics, it might be capable of participating in the struggle for a dictatorship of the proletariat. Against Artaud, Naville critiques the tendency to interpret Surrealism as a revolt against «Western mentality» (ibid., 89).

In the first place, he urges the abandonment of the myth of a «return to the East» and brands obscurantist any contempt for the conquests of science and technology, reminding that «what constitutes the riches of modern life, *machines* (more specifically: dominion of the metallurgic and textile industries, precision machinery, means of transport etc. and all their applications) are the matter in which the Surrealists, among others, have discovered the splendid» (ibid., 90). In the second place, Naville indicates that the spirit of revolt and the «absolutely subversive will» of Surrealism cannot find satisfaction in «individual furor», in a passion relative to the individual, but in a «general passion» that «denies all aristocracy» (ibid., 91). In the third place, considering it unjustifiable from a Marxist point of view to oppose East and West, Naville maintains that «when Surrealism enlists in the exclusive recognition [$\frac{1}{4}$] of the life of the dream, of the Eastern spirit imagined as contemplation, a separation from material reality, it takes the wrong path», and, ostensibly guided by moral considerations, points in the opposite direction to «the elementary needs of the proletarian revolution» (ibid., 96). Lastly,

after questioning actions such as the pamphlet *Un cadavre* (1924) against Anatole France («May he who dies surrounded by beatitude in turn become smoke!»), the anti-nationalist taunt of the banquet in homage to Saint-Pol-Roux («Long live the Germans») or the *Lettre ouverte à Paul Claudel* («It is not possible to be a French ambassador and a poet»), he concludes that «the quarrels of the intelligentsia are entirely vain» before the univocal reality of capitalism: «the Salary is a material necessity to which three quarters of the world's population are subject, independent of the origin of their moral or philosophical positions, called Eastern or Western» (ibid., 97; see also Breton [1982]: 24, 50, 53-54).

«By mid-October 1927, in number 9/10 of “La Révolution surréaliste”, Naville publishes *Mieux et moins bien*, where he returns to the theses of *La Révolution et les Intellectuels*. Denouncing the charms of psychologism once more, throwing out Breton's counterarguments in *Légitime défense* (1926), and judging as vain – though doubtless in good faith – the efforts of the letters written by Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret and Pierre Unik in *Au grand jour* (1927) to render Surrealism and Marxism compatible, Naville proposes that, instead of «theoretical enigmas» setting out a task ill-suited to Surrealism, it would be preferable to put the notion of «pessimism» into play, a notion around which exists a considerable lack of reflection (Naville [1927]: 57). Pessimism, properly understood, «addresses in a general way the virtue of Surrealism, its current reality, and perhaps even more its future developments»: «serious, tireless» spirits of all ages, «that are harshly applied to their object, share certain fundamental despair» (ibid., 58).

In so far as it is a «search for extreme means» to escape the perplexities of a difficult era «pessimism is the point of origin of Hegelian philosophy and is also the source of Marx's revolutionary method» (ibid.). For this reason, it must not be confused with «contemplation» or «skepticism» which is its outward appearance (ibid.). «Desperation», the mother of pessimism, «is a violent passion» that «is nourished by deep and prolonged

desires» and «puts patience to the test» (ibid.). A far cry from those who would see it progress, like all European intelligence, «in the direction of a *humanism*», Surrealism, rather, faces the task of «organizing pessimism»:

The organization of pessimism is one of the strangest slogans that conscious man can obey. Nonetheless, we demand this method – if it can be so called – be bound to it, and it would be fairer to say: this tendency allows and may continue to allow us to observe the highest partiality; it will prevent us, at the same time, from despairing, that is to say, we will maintain our absolute right to existence in this world.

So pessimism cannot be developed nor can its effects be prolonged by simple verbal affirmation. This affirmation can be prompted all too easily by any failed attempt, by any disappointment.

In this way, only living resources can find a meaning in pessimism worthy of the years accumulated at our feet. We must organize pessimism; or, moreover, given that this is not about responding to a call, we must let it be organized in the direction of the next call. (ibid., 60)

The imprint of Naville's ideas in Benjamin's essay goes beyond the link I have shown with *profane Erleuchtung* and *Rausch*. Numerous observations on the «dialectic evolution» of Surrealism from «an extreme contemplative position» to «a revolutionary attitude» show the text explicitly taking up the thesis of *Mieux et moins bien* on the «organization of pessimism» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 308; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 216). Following Naville, Benjamin maintains that in order to understand the developments achieved by Surrealism, it is necessary to confront Surrealism with the typical thought of «the left-wing French intelligentsia» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 304; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 213). Characteristics of this bourgeois position, in which «moral idealism» and «political praxis» are incurably coupled, are clearly demonstrated in the attitude toward the Soviet Union (ibid.). Faced with this state of things, the Surrealists have made their own «a radical concept of freedom», unknown in Europe since Bakunin: the Surrealists were «the first to liquidate the

sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 306; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 215). In testimony of this, Benjamin cites (partially and in his own translation) a paragraph of *Nadja*, where Breton says that «freedom, which can be bought only with a thousand of the hardest sacrifices, demands to be enjoyed unrestrictedly in its fullness without any kind of pragmatic calculation, given that mankind's struggle, conceived in its most simple revolutionary form, which is, precisely, liberation in every aspect according to the means available to each of us, continues to be the only cause worth serving» (ibid.; see also Breton [1964]: 168).

The question at hand is whether Surrealism is in a position to integrate this anarchic experience of freedom with the «constructive, dictatorial experience of revolution», whether or not it is truly capable, in short, of «binding revolt to revolution» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 307; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 215). In all revolutionary action, as Naville notes, there is an «*état de fureur*» that identifies itself with an anarchic element. Benjamin's answer is the watchword: «To win the forces of *Rausch* for revolution» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 307-308; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 215-216). To emphasize anarchic element exclusively means to renounce «the methodical and disciplinary preparation of the revolution» and, fundamentally, not to comprehend the «dialectic of *Rausch*», that is, the necessary transmutation from an individual psychological state to a collective bodily experience. As Naville states in the project of declaration set out in *La Révolution et les intellectuels*, the point is to reach «by way of this furor [¼] what could be called 'Surrealist illumination'» (Naville [1975]: 73). Benjamin, expurgating the concept of all esoteric implication, prefers to speak of a *profane Erleuchtung* that he defines as «a materialist, anthropological inspiration» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 297; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 209). Indeed, the surrealist conception of the nature of *Rausch* is «undialectical» and its theory of art «is entangled in a number of very pernicious romantic prejudices»; instead a serious study of «profane illumination» has as precondition «a dialectic

tical implication» that a romantic mind entirely ignores:

Stressing pathetically or fanatically the enigmatic side of the enigma takes us no further; on the contrary, we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we find it in daily life, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives daily as impenetrable, the impenetrable as daily life. The most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomena, for example, will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic process) as the profane illumination of reading will teach us about telepathic phenomena. Or the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking will teach us about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the expectant, the flâneur are types of enlightened just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the drunken. And more profane. Not to mention the most terrible drug – ourselves – which we take in solitude. (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 307-308; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 216)

According to Benjamin, «to win the forces of *Rausch* for the revolution» does not involve a «poetic politics», in the nature of the rhetoric of the social-democrat progressivism that promises «the finer future» of humanity, in which all shall act «as if they were angels» and everyone shall have as much «as if they were rich» and shall live «as if they were free» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 308; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 216). Against this «unscrupulous, dilettantish optimism», Naville proposed the «organization of pessimism», by approaching surrealism to the Communist answer. The radical meaning of this slogan is: «Pessimism all along the line. Absolutely and by all means. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but particularly mistrust, mistrust and mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in *IG Farben* and the peaceful perfecting of the air force» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 308; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 216-217). In this sense, Benjamin implicitly assumes that a political

poetics must be implemented in opposition to the «poetic politics» of the left-wing bourgeois intelligentsia. Louis Aragon's distinction in *Traité du style* (1928) between comparison or metaphor and image needs in fact extending on a political plan, for organizing pessimism means nothing other than to literalize the «as if», that is to say: «to haul out moral metaphor from politics and to discover in the space of political action the one hundred per cent image space (*Bildraum*)» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 309; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217; Aragon [1983]: 151).

2. NIHILISM AND SECULARIZATION OF MYSTICISM

In the notes of *Pariser Passagen* <I>, written between June 1927 and December 1929, Benjamin significantly establishes a sharp opposition between Heidegger and Surrealism. According to him, it would be of «vital interest to recognize, at a particular point of development, thoughts at a crossroads: the new view on the historical world at the point where the decision (*Entscheidung*) is forthcoming to its reactionary or revolutionary exploitation» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, O°, 4, 1026; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 857). In this sense, what is put to work in *Sein und Zeit* and the political position adopted in the texts of Naville, Breton and other members of the Surrealist movement would be the same thing with antithetical resolutions. The observation appears slightly expanded in the convolute S of the *Passagen-Werk*:

Of vital interest to recognize a particular point of development as a crossroad. The new historical thought, characterized both in general and in details by a higher concreteness, redemption of periods of decline, revision of periodization, presently stands at this point, and its utilization in a reactionary or revolutionar[y] sense is now being decided. What is announced in the writings of the Surrealists and in the new book by Heidegger is the same crisis in its two possible solutions. (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, S1, 6, 676; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 544-545)

We know that Benjamin's divergences with Heidegger's conception of historical world date back to his youth³. On the horizon of the *Passagenarbeit*, the importance of a critical dispute with Heidegger is clearly stated in a letter to Gershom Scholem, written in French and dated in Paris January 20th 1930: «What appears to me today as an established fact is that for this book as well as for the *Trauerspiel*, I cannot dispense with an introduction about the theory of knowledge – and, this time, especially about the knowledge of history. It is there that I shall find Heidegger on my path and I expect some sparks to fly from the clash of our very different ways of considering history» (Benjamin [1925-1930]: 671, 503). Although the idea of this confrontation with Heidegger's philosophy of history was abandoned after 1933, when Benjamin joined the Institut für Sozialforschung and he reformulated the *Passagenarbeit*, the final phase of his work allowed a glimpse of some aspects in relation to which these crossroads of historical thought, exploited in «a reactionary or revolutionary sense», which he believes were anticipated in *Sein und Zeit* and in the Surrealists' texts still guide his reflections.

I would like, to this effect, to refer to two writings of this period, where he expanded this confrontation⁴. The first one is *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. As we can see in his drafts, Benjamin went back over the issue of the «organization of pessimism», whose aim is just to «discover, in the space of political action, the... image space» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 3, 1234; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 404). The firm nature of this pessimism is shown in thesis VIII, through a paradoxical development reformulation of Carl Schmitt's politi-

cal «decisionism»: «The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' that we live in is the rule» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 697; see Schmitt [1922]: 11-41, 49; Schmitt [1928]: XIV). As to the image space opening up in the *profane illumination*, it is taken up especially in thesis V, where Benjamin speaks of «the authentic image of the past» that «fleets by» and arises in a lightning only to fade away forever «at the instant of its knowability» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 695; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 390; Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 3, 1261). We can mention in that regard a continuum line in Benjamin's thought. In a 1920/1921 fragment on *Erkenntnistheorie*, he had already stated two things: on one hand, that «the now of knowability is *logical time*, which has to replace that of timeless validity», for «the world is knowable *now*»; on the other hand, that «[a]cts, like perception», which are «unbroken in the perfected state of the world», «enter only broken, inauthentic, unreal in the the now of knowability» in the form of «*symbolic concepts*»: «Truth, too, is authentic and unbroken in the perfected state of the world, but it alone is also unbroken in the now of knowability» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: VI, 46; Benjamin [1913-1926]: 276-277). A few years later, in the convolute N of the *Passagen-Werk*, the image of the *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* was identified with the dialectical image, indicating that the materialist representation of history is eminently «figurative (*bildlich*)», unlike Heidegger's «historicality», that rests upon phenomenological abstractions (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 1, N3, 1, 577-578; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 462). In the same convolute, Benjamin adds that the moment of historical conscious awaking «would be identical with the «now of knowability», in which things put on their true – surrealist – face» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 1, N3a, 3, 579; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 463-464). It is at this moment that «the historian undertakes, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 1, N4, 1, 581; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 464)⁵.

³ With regard to this subject, see Caygill [1994], Schwarz Wentzer [1998: 82-92], Ibarlucía [2000; 2005], Fenves [2010]: 103-124.

⁴ For its implications in the field of aesthetics and theory of art, see Soussana [1999], Desideri [1983; 1999], Knocke [2000], Long [2001], Hanssen [2005], Lindner [2006], Ibarlucía [2014] and the recent book compiled by Benjamin and Vardoulakis [2017] with contributions by Peter Fenves, Gerhard Richter, Ilit Ferber, A. Kiarina Kordela, Paula Scwebel, Antonia Egel, Joanna Hodge, Krzysztof Ziarek, David Ferris and the editors.

⁵ On Benjamin's notion of a *Traumdeutung* of collective dream and its relation to Surrealism, see Bischof, Lenk [1986] and Lenk [1998].

The epistemic concept of the *Jetzt der Erk-enbarkeit* is closely related to that of the *Jetztzeit*, usually translated by «now-time», although in his own French version of his theses Benjamin prefers the word «present» between quotation marks (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 3, 1266). After comparing the German manuscript that belonged to Hannah Arendt with the typewritten copy, found at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 1981, Giorgio Agamben indicated that, in the thesis XIV of this version, the word *Jetztzeit* is also placed between quotation marks: «History is the subject of a construction whose place is not homogeneous and empty time but time filled full by “*Jetztzeit*”» (Agamben [2000]: 132; Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 70; Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 3, 1249). The quotation marks disappeared when the same word was later used in thesis XVIII, which became the XIX after this copy was discovered: «The *Jetztzeit*, which as a model of messianic time, summarizes in an immense abbreviation the entire history of mankind, completely corresponds with the figure the history of mankind takes in the universe» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 703; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 396). Agamben rightly reminds that in German the philosophical history of the word «shows that it was generally associated with negative and anti-messianic connotations»; it appears so, for example, in Schopenhauer’s *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851): «This – our time – calls itself by a name as characteristic as it is euphemistic: yes, *Jetztzeit*, that is, only the now is explored and the time that comes and judges is not even glanced at» (Agamben [2000]: 133; Schopenhauer [1960-1965]: IV, 213-214). Moreover, Hegel himself disdains the fragile temporality of the *Jetzt*. In the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), he dedicates the beginning of his analysis of «sensitive certainty» to explicate why the now, under the double figure of the *hic et nunc*, is merely an illusion, something negative and void, which is nothing in essence and that only emerges when it disappears, something that escapes all enunciation, something unavailable to language (Hegel [1979]: I, 82-93).

Some decades ago, Werner Fuld suggested that Benjamin could have borrowed the word «*Jetz-*

tzeit» from Heidegger’s early essay *Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, which was published in 1916 (Fuld [1979]: 78). However, Heidegger does not use this word in this particular text but he does in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), the very work that Benjamin opposes to the Surrealists’ writings in his notes of the *Pariser Passagen* <I> and the convolute N of the *Passagen-Werk*. In Heidegger’s book, the expression «*Jetzt-Zeit*» – separated by a dash – refers to «daily time as it is ‘seen’ on the clock» (Heidegger [1975-ss.]: II, 421); it relates to the inauthentic historicity of *das Man*, which conceals the originary individual destiny of the *Dasein* and displays its «everydayness» in inconstancy, in the expectation of «novelty» and in the pursuit of «the modern» (ibid., 391). Heidegger maintains that the «now» is essentially different from the «instant (*Augenblick*)», literally understood as «wink», just as the authentic present differs from the inauthentic one (ibid., 337-338). The «ecstatic unity» of this instant of vision constitutes the existential-ontological structure of temporality of the *Dasein* as an «illuminato (*erleuchtet*)» being, that is, «enlightened in itself as being-in-the-world, not by any other being, but in such a way that itself is the clearing (*Lichtung*)» (ibid., 133, 350). This «clearedness (*Gelichtetheit*)» is merely what makes «all illumination (*Erleuchtung*) and clarification (*Erhellung*)» possible (ibid., 350-351). Thus, in the context of the exegesis of the «Care» that provides the world with its significance, it becomes the condition of the *Entschlossenheit*, the anticipatory resoluteness of the future, which is no other than the authentic mode of the being-toward-death in which *Dasein* is charged with the task of assuming itself against its own nothingness (ibid., 385-386).

The historical knowledge of the truth, that Benjamin thematizes as being inherent to the «now of knowability», is not an essential knowledge of this kind, an ontological revelation that founds «the originary and authentic temporality» of the being-in-the-world of the *Dasein* (ibid., 329). This knowledge, says Benjamin in the same series of notes in *Pariser Passagen* <I> where we can read the remark on *Sein und Zeit* and on the writings of the Surreal-

ist, «is possible only as overcoming the appearance» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, O°, 81, 1034-1035; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 864), in which the past, according to Heidegger, would be contained in the unity of the ecstasies of time. Yet this *Aufhebung*, adds Benjamin, «should not signify the volatilization» nor «the actualization of the object», but «the configuration of a *rapid* image», in contrast to the «quietness» of essences; the ephemeral image that forms therein coincides with the «surrealist mien of things in the now», but not in the future: «The appearance overcome here is that an [e]arlier time is in the now. In truth: the [n]ow [is] the inmost image of what has been» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, O°, 81, 1034; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 865). Thus, in a paragraph of intertextual relevance with respect to Heidegger's language, Benjamin says that «*this* now being», which is nothing but «the being now of the now time (*das Jetztsein des Jetztzeit*)», can achieve a high concreteness of the object by the «dialectical method» only within the framework of a philosophy of history that has overcome in all respects the ideology of progress and replaced the historical view of the past by politics, that has transformed «political categories into theoretical» and ensured that «any past event (for its time) can acquire a greater degree of actuality than it had at the time it took place», adapting it to the «concrete-historical situation of the *interest* of the now time thanks to the image in which and by which it is comprehended» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, O°, 5, 1026; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 857).

For Benjamin, unlike Heidegger, the ephemeral *Jetztzeit* has an intensive significance. At the very core of his theory of secularization, in the *Theologisch-politisches Fragment* (1920/1921-1922/1923), the profane temporality as «the rhythm of messianic nature» refers to the idea of happiness, the worldly *restitutio in integrum* that leads to the eternity of a downfall: «For nature is messianic by cause of its eternal and total transience» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 204; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 306)⁶. To strive for the destruc-

tion of all earthly order is the task of revolutionary politics, «whose method must be called nihilism» (ibid.). Benjamin sees the willingness of that restatement in the Surrealist discovery of «the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”»: «No one before these visionaries and soothsayers ever noticed how misery, not only social but also architectonic, the misery of interiors, enslaved and enslaving things, can be suddenly changed into revolutionary nihilism» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 299; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 210). In this sense, as Richard Wolin has pointed out, Benjamin's interpretation of Surrealism, on the one hand, «bridges the gap» between his early studies, openly metaphysical and theological, and the materialist principles of his later investigation, having found an answer to his search for a «superior, noumenal concept of experience», which inspired his critique of Kant in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (1917), in an idea of redemption «mainly as a secular, collective and socio-historical phenomenon» (Wolin [1986]: 675); on the other hand, it allows to differentiate «his own “conservative revolutionary” tendency, his inclination to view radical destruction as a necessary prerequisite for cultural renewal, from those of his proto-fascist contemporaries», amongst others Gottfried Benn, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Ludwig Klages, Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger (Wolin [1994]: XXVII).

Thus Benjamin identifies the «revolutionary nihilism» of the surrealists with the «anthropological materialism» and distinguishes it from the «anthropological nihilism» that he speaks of in the *Passagen-Werk*: the «specifically medical nihilism», deriving from the sense of loss of the individual confronted with the modern world (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 1, K7 a, 2, 507, N8 a, 1, 590; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 402, 472). This last nihilism manifested itself in a number of expressionist works, in which Carl Gustav Jung perceived a prophetic anticipation of the orientation of the conscience, and in which György Lukács detected a close relationship with the European extreme right-wing movements. This important distinction between two different forms of nihilism was

⁶ On this topic, see Weigel [2008]: 27-56 and also Dubels [2010]: 39-65.

neglected by Karl-Heinz Bohrer, who assimilated Benjamin's posture to that of Ernst Jünger in relation to a "decisionist" literary modernity, whose genealogy could go back to Friedrich Schlegel's romantic messianism. In Bohrer's view, they both shared the same concern about the growing mechanization of the *Lebenswelt*, which threatened to dissolve the chances of an authentic and truly transforming experience. Benjamin's identification to the «revolutionary nihilism» of the Surrealists would have, ultimately, a common matrix with Jünger's «anthropological nihilism» (Bohrer [1978]: 190-200, 359-366). Nevertheless, Benjamin criticizes harshly this kind of hygienic nihilism and argues that its aesthetic cult of war is «a shameless transposition of the thesis of *l'Art pour l'Art*», as it can be read in *Theorien des deutschen Fachismus* (1930), his review of the anthology *Krieg und Krieger*, including essays by Ernst and Friedrich Gregor Jünger, Wilhelm von Schramm, Gerhard and Albrecht Erich Günther, Ernst von Salomon, Friedrich Hielscher and Werner Best (Benjamin [1892-1940]: III, 240; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 314). By employing a formulation which in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935-1939) will allow him to define the «aestheticization of politics» promoted by fascism in opposition to the «politicization of art» of communism (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 467-469, 506-508, 737-739; Benjamin [1892-1940]: VII, 1, 382-384), he maintains that war, «in the metaphysical abstraction» in which Jünger and German nationalist believe, «is nothing other than the attempt to resolve, mystically and without mediation, the secret of nature, understood idealistically, through technique», rather than the elucidation of the great changes industrial development had introduced and its use in favor of the secular interests of manhood (Benjamin [1892-1940]: III, 247; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 319).

The following text to which I would like to draw attention here is the bibliographical commentary on Albert Béguin's *L'âme romantique et le rêve* (1937), published by Benjamin in *Maß und Wert* at the beginning of 1939. In this review, Heidegger's *Existenzphilosophie* is opposed to Surreal-

ism, as it was ten years earlier in *Pariser Passagen <I>*. German Romanticism, Benjamin holds, is not represented by Béguin «as the matrix of the French Romanticism, but as the Romantic phenomenon *par excellence*, on the grounds of which the initiation in this movement of spirit has to take place» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: III, 557; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 153). In his historical construction, Surrealism certainly appears to be the absolute heir of German Romanticism, as it is inferred from the fact that the book opens with an epigraph from Aragon's *Une vague de rêves*, while the penultimate chapter, entitled *Naissance de la poésie*, explicitly sets out this idea through a reflection on Aragon's text, the first *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton's *Les vases communicants* (1932) and the poetry of Paul Éluard.

According to Béguin, Symbolism had prepared the way for a generation of French poets who, in the years following the First World War, made two aspects of Rimbaud's program their own: «metaphysical revolt against the imperfect human condition and delicate attention to the revelations of the unconscious» (Béguin [1939]: 390). During the Dadaist period, new poetry expressed itself above all as denial and eager disorganization; following that, in Surrealism, as an «attempt at reconstruction, at metaphysical affirmation» (ibid.) that sought to register a clear awareness of the processes that had become familiar in poetry throughout the Nineteenth Century. In this sense, Surrealism came close to German Romanticism not only in the way it made use of dreams; Aragon and Breton were interested in the Romantic poets, and if later they reneged on them «with great injustice», perhaps with the exception of Archim von Arnim, it was because of the same «reflection» that led them to separate themselves from Rimbaud in order to aggrandize Lautréamont:

In the Paris of 1925, as in the Germany of 1800, a group of young poets tried to find –by way of an organized sym-philosophia and sym-poiesis – a precise method that would allow them to bring the hidden reality of unconscious life into the light of day. The spiritual movement is more or less the same: they

proclaim the value of knowledge inherent in spontaneous groupings of words and in the images that arise from the inner shadow; and they seek to bring the treasures of the unconscious into consciousness. (ibid.)

For Béguin, Surrealism presented itself as a «method» and, as both Aragon and Breton specified, a method within reach of all. Surrealist practice is understood as «a continuing series of exercises, comparable to those of mystics, through which the poetic grace could be “obtained”» (ibid.). This illumination could be provoked by «all possible means – automatism in writing and speech, the use of drugs, concerted use of hallucinations triggered by fatigue, etc. –, those states of consciousness in which the spirit, removed from logic, achieves a closer form of communication with its unknown depths» (ibid.). In this way, the Surrealists sought to go «beyond the constructed personality, to more primitive layers of being» and to capture, as Aragon writes in *Une vague de rêves*, that «mental matter which the similarity of hallucinations and sensations compelled us to consider different from thought, of which thought itself, just like its sensible modes, could only be a particular case» (ibid.; see also Aragon [1990]: 14-15). Nonetheless, the adoption of this method in Surrealism never had a literary purpose, nor did Rimbaud’s «deranging of the senses»; rather, it rested «upon a millennial hope, similar to the dream of the Golden Age of Novalis», that stood out, the only saviour, «against the sombre background of universal despair» (ibid.).

Benjamin’s critique is directed towards precisely this identification between Surrealism and German Romanticism. Béguin would have made a more useful contribution to historical knowledge, if he had provided an «authentic synthesis», as Goethe recommended, instead of contenting himself with «contemporary considerations about Surrealism and *Existenzphilosophie*» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: III, 559; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 154). With this objection, Benjamin seems to imply above all a question: Surrealism and *Existenzphilosophie* can only be understood in relation to the process of the «secularization of the mysti-

cal tradition» (ibid.). As Ralf Simon pointed out, he draws the attention here on a «seminal motif» of *Politische Theologie* (1922) by Carl Schmitt, but to give it a different configuration (Simon [2009]: 183). Against the backdrop of secularization of mystical experience, it is necessary to differentiate between Heidegger’s metaphysical illumination and its counterpart, the «profane illumination» of Surrealism, which he described as «a materialist, anthropological inspiration» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 296; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 209). German Romanticism drew a close to this process of secularization of mysticism which had started in the Seventeenth Century. The alchemists, the *Illuminati*, the Rosicrucians, and other secret organizations had prepared what, with Romanticism, had come to its end. The mystic tradition did not go through this process without any damage, as would prove the heretical deviations of pietism and the thaumaturgy of Cagliostro or Adamus Saint-Germain, just like the magical rituals and occultism that invaded the popular strata of European society:

Romantic esotericism was cultivated out of this experience. It was a reactionary movement with all the aggressions of that genre. In Novalis, mysticism finally imposed itself, establishing itself on the firm ground of religious experience: even more so in Ritter. It is not the outpourings of the late Romantics that show the occult sciences to be newly in vogue, but the return of Friedrich Schlegel. In the age in which the secularization of the mystic tradition is accomplished, a social and industrial development arises that puts into question a mystical experience that has lost its sacredness. The consequence for a Friedrich Schlegel, a Clemens Bretano, a Zacharias Werner, was conversion. Others like Troxler or Schindler took refuge in a call to the oneiric life, in the vegetable and animal signs of the unconscious. They began a strategic retreat and opened up areas of elevated mystic life in order to preserve that which was established in nature. Their call to oneiric life was an alarm signal; it revealed less the way back to the soul and mother earth than the obstacles that impeded it. (Benjamin [1892-1940]: III, 559-560)

3. ANTHROPOLOGICAL MATERIALISM

In his letter to Scholem of 20 January 1930, in which he refers to the «*entre-choc*» with Heidegger's philosophy of history, Benjamin describes the *Passagenarbeit* as «the theatre of all my combats and all my ideas» (Benjamin [1925-1930]: 671, 503). Besides, he evokes his stay in Paris and refers to the divisions that slipped into Surrealism after Breton's *Second manifeste* (1929), as he mentions that he has just published a review on this topic in "Die literarische Welt" (ibid., 504). In this text, Benjamin had briefly commented upon the appearance of *Bifur*, a «Surrealist orientated» magazine, originated in «a complete secession, or rather a series of secessions» within the movement, on grounds of which a group of authors – Robert Desnos, Jacques Baron, Roger Vitrac, Michel Leiris and others, headed by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes – had broken away from Breton and Aragon, who had themselves launched *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* (Benjamin [1892-1940]: IV, 1, 595). In their new publication, Breton and Aragon closed ranks and set the «guidelines of the movement that converged entirely in communism, raising this group's ever controversial attitude to its most heightened expression» (ibid.). In contrast to Breton and Aragon's orthodox position, «the *Bifur* circle introduces to the public the new trends of a less aggressive nature by opposing to the Parisian-muscovite tone of Surrealism an international and urbane tone» (ibid., 596). The first issue of *Bifur*, adds Benjamin, gathers in fact contributions from André Malraux, Blaise Cendrars, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, André Salmon, Jean Giraudoux, Jules Supervielle and Emmanuel Berl, among the French authors, Alfred Döblin, Gottfried Benn and Franz Kafka, among the German ones, James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill and Ernest Hemingway, among the English-language writers, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Pilnjak and Vsevolod Ivanov, among the Russians, Giorgio de Chirico and Massimo Bontempelli, among the Italians, and Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Vicente Huidobro, among the Spanish and Latin-Americans.

In this context, Benjamin draws attention to

Emmanuel Berl, who has just separated from the Surrealist movement (Benjamin [1925-1930]: 671, 503). Benjamin affirms that what distinguishes Berl is «an entirely strange critical intelligence, confirmed above all by one book», *Mort de la pensée bourgeoise* (1929), «destined to spur a series of pamphlets», the second of which, *Mort de la moral bourgeoise* (1930), has also begun to appear in the literary magazine *Europe* (ibid., 671, 504). Underlining that Berl is a "Jewish" intellectual, Benjamin says: «These writings are surprisingly close to my own point of view. But to the extent that they are limited strictly to critique, the difficulties for those who strive to build on these foundations apparently remain unknown to the author» (ibid.)⁷. Benjamin's declaration of a general agreement with the perspective of the "First pamphlet", quoted in *Pariser Passagen <I>* in relation to the increasing difficulty of «being at the same time revolutionary in the spiritual plane and the social plane» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, O°, 54, 1032; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 852; Berl [1929]: 40), acquires an additional relevance here with regard to the "anthropological materialism" that Theodor W. Adorno reproaches him in a letter of November 1938, in which he communicates his critical remarks to Benjamin's projected book on Charles Baudelaire, by indicating that it is nothing but a non-dialectical and «unmediated materialism» that shelters a latent and «deep Romantic element» (Adorno, Benjamin [1928-1940]: 110, 368).

Adorno's objections seem to be as accurate from the stance of Critical Theory as they are alien to Benjamin's programmatic intentions, who wished to save romantic anti-capitalism and the "utopian socialism" tradition that had been repudiated by Marxism⁸. In the final paragraph of *Der Sürrealismus*, Benjamin opposes this "anthropological materialism" to "metaphysical materialism" represented by German evolutionist scientist Karl

⁷ For more considerations on Berl, see Benjamin's *Pariser Tagebuch*, January 18, 1929 (Benjamin [1892-1940]: IV, 1, 573-575; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 341-343).

⁸ On Adorno's objections, see Wolin [1994: XVIII-XXIV, 198-206; 1999], as well as Barck [2006]: 395-396.

Vogt, parliamentarian of the liberal left, against whom Marx had dedicated a polemical book, *Herr Vogt* (1860), as well as by the Russian intellectual Nikolai Bukharin, who was called «scholastic» by Lenin in his alleged political testament (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 309-310; Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1040; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217; see also Lenin [1926]). Likewise, in *Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers* (1934), which incidentally includes a brief summary of the essay on Surrealism, Benjamin revisited this opposition, and argued that «the movement broke over its founders under the form of an inspirational dream wave», but its «dialectical development» was such that «the image space which it had so boldly opened up for itself proved to be more and more identical with the space of political praxis» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 2, 798; Benjamin [1931-1934]: 759-760). In the kernel of that space, Surrealists have «located the home of a classless society» whose promise emanates not so much from the «didactic materialism» of Bukharin and Georgi Plekhanov, than from «anthropological materialism» containing their own experience and, before them, those of Rimbaud and Lautréamont (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 2, 798; Benjamin [1931-1934]: 760).

Benjamin's assimilation of Bucharin's socio-logical theories to the evolutionist materialism of Vogt have led Michael Löwy to suggest that Benjamin is echoing Lukács's review of *Theorie des historischen Materialismus* (1921), whose German translation appeared in 1925 (Löwy [2007]: 89). This certainly cannot be ruled out. However, as Löwy himself is forced to admit, the identification of the source is not enough to explain the notion of «anthropological materialism». Benjamin shares Lukács's objection to Bukharin's «contemplative materialism» that «instead of launching a historical-materialist critique of natural science and its methods, i. e. revealing them as products of capitalist development, extends these methods to the study of society without hesitation, without critique, ahistorically and non-dialectically» (Lukács [1962-1986]: II, 611). According to Lukács, the philosophical mistake of Bukharin, of which his

theory of society would be a direct consequence, is to attribute to technology «an overly preponderant role that completely abandons the *spirit* of dialectical materialism», even if there are writings of Marx and Engels that could be interpreted in this manner (ibid., 609). From his point of view, Bukharin's «final identification of technology with the forces of production» is barely Marxist and entirely incorrect: «Technology is a *part* of – and a moment, it should be noted, of great importance for – productive social forces, but it is not straightforwardly identified with them» (ibid., 610). When the socio-economic process that determines it falls out of sight, technology becomes «a transcendent principle opposing man himself, like “nature”, the weather, the environment, commodities, etc.» (ibid.). Quite literally, it is naturalized: Bukharin separates technology from other ideological forms and treats it as a self-sufficient entity, gifted with its own dynamic.

In Benjamin's view, such a “metaphysical”, “contemplative” or “didactical” materialism of the communist theory is not transferred «without ruptures» into anthropological materialism, as it is documented in both the experiences of the Surrealists and their precursors and those of Johann Peter Hebel, Georg Büchner and Friedrich Nietzsche (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 309; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217)⁹. Regarding Hebel – an Alemannic dialectal poet and evangelical theologian –, Benjamin said of him in 1926 that he gave voice to «a metaphysics that is collectively experienced and that matters more than any lived

⁹ Berdet (2013) distinguishes five directions of Benjamin's «anthropological materialism» based on the writers Benjamin refers to in his essay and in the *Passagenarbeit*: «French utopian socialism» (Charles Fourier, Claire Démar, Saint-Simon, Ganeau, Toussenel, the Vésuviennes, Fusionism and Paul Scheerbart's architectural Utopia); the «literary physiologies» (Balzac); the «illuminated prose» (Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Apollinaire, Breton, Aragon, as well as Dostoevskij and Edgar Allan Poe), the «German pedagogies» (Jean Paul, Hebel) and the «hedonistic materialism» (Gottfried Keller, Büchner, Karl Gutzkow, as well as Ludwig Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Hérault de Séchelles).

experience»: in his *Kalendergeschichten* (1808-1815), «Voltaire, Condorcet, Diderot» reincarnate as «rascals» and «lumpens», and «the unspeakable mean understanding of his Jews has no more of the Talmud than of the spirit of Moses Hess, the somewhat later predecessors of the socialist» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 281-282; Benjamin [1913-1926]: 433). His characters, underlines Benjamin, have a lot in common with «the somber and dreadful petit-bourgeois» of Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836-37), that he mentions in the paripomena of his essay (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 278-279; Benjamin [1913-1926]: 429). In turn, Benjamin wrote in *Kapitalismus als Religion* (1921), Nietzsche's nihilism represents magnificently «the prototype of capitalist religious thought», which is characterized by the universal growth of «guilt (*Schuld*)» and the transformation of despair into «a religious state of the world from which healing is expected»: «God's transcendence has fallen. But he is not dead; he is involved in man's destiny» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: VI, 100-101; Benjamin [1913-1926]: 288-289). Nietzsche's Übermensch is «historical man who has grown up right to Heaven» and its notion «transposes the apocalyptic "leap" not into conversion, expiation, purification and penitence, but into an apparently steady, though in the final analysis explosive and discontinuous intensification» of humanity: in other words, it means «the breaking open of Heaven through increased humanization» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: VI, 101; Benjamin [1913-1926]: 289).

Something of this experience of nihilism is lost in dialectical materialism by «a macula or a construction defect» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1040). «A remainder» however is still non-thought, to wit, that «social» is also «corporeal»: collective is not «the matter nor the abstract cosmos» one thinks, rather something concrete, natural and alive (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 310; Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1040; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217). In Surrealism, the «destruction of aesthetics», *qua* sphere separated from life, is attained by means of a «double articulation»: with «the animal creatureliness (*Kreatürlich-Animalische*),

on the one hand, and with the politico-materialistic, on the other» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1035, 1040). The «Physic creature» and the political materialism «share the inner man, the psyche, the individual or whatever else we wish to throw to him, with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains untorn» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 309; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217). Thus, «anthropological materialism» rejects Lukacksian culturalism and reintroduces the continuity between nature and culture, body and conscience, matter and spirit. Benjamin's thesis, however, does not derive from Nineteenth Century evolutionary positivism nor from Friedrich Engels' *Dialektik der Natur*, which was published posthumously in 1925, but basically from the consideration of an event that affects the collective body: «the *physis*, which is being organized for it in the technique, occurs, according to its political and objective reality, only in the image space, where the profane illumination makes us feel at home» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 310; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217). For this reason, Benjamin says in the paripomena, «the innermost body world is so closely bound to the revolution, so harnessed with all its tensions, so thoroughly penetrated by them as its own meaning as the great religions of India and Judaism were by morality» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1040).

As a corollary to this issue, Benjamin wrote in the last paragraph of his essay: «Only when the body and the image interpenetrate one another so deeply does all revolutionary innervation become a collective corporeal innervation and all corporeal innervation become revolutionary. Only then can reality be overcome as the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* requires» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 310; Benjamin [1927-1930]: 217-218). A few years later, in the initial versions and the notes of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, he asserts again that modern technique – called here «second technique» in contrast to the archaic one which was linked to magic and ritual practices – is confronted with humanity «as a second nature and, certainly, as wars and economic crisis prove it, a no

less fundamental nature than that primitive society had to face up to»: «Before this second nature, man, who invented it but has long lost control over it, carries out a learning process like the one he has completed in the face of the first technique» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 444). Just like in prehistory «the control over forces of nature implied the domination of the elemental forces of society», the mastery of machine technique is, for the modern individual, an essential condition for «the domination of elemental social forces» and the emancipation from submission to labor through «the unlimited broadening of room-for-play» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 3, 1047). Returning to his reflections on “anthropological materialism” Benjamin concludes with these words: «The aim of revolutions is to accelerate this adaptation. Revolutions are innervations of the collective: more precisely, attempts at innervation on the part of the new collective which, for the first time in history, finds its organs in the second technique» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 717, n. 3; Benjamin [1892-1940]: VII, 2, 360, n. 4).

Upon commenting Benjamin's thesis according to which Surrealism overcame religious illumination in favor of «a profane illumination, a materialist, anthropological inspiration», Jacob Taubes related two major issues: the «reevaluation of poetic fantasy» before natural order and the repetition of «gnostic acosmism» (Taubes [1996]: 139, 141-142). According to him, the «Surrealist allegory» bears witness to the scission between «subjective fantasy» and «objective world» already existent in romantic symbolism and in Baudelaire's esoterism, all the while expressing the «lack of world of a nihilist experience», which was firstly associated to the principles of revolutionary communism but then broke off from the world revolution programme in the course of the routinization of revolutionary impulse (ibid., 138). Unlike the gnostic protest, the surrealist revolt is not aimed at the cosmos *stricto sensu*, but rather against the *fatum* of natural science and technique, perceived «as a system of domination and oppression» which has no longer «a guarantee of a God beyond the world» (ibid., 140). Within the framework of “anthropological

materialism” that Benjamin speaks of, the French prefix *sur* before the name Surrealism becomes decisive. The «unique meaning of the word Beyond» is poetry, Aragon writes in *Traité du style*, and his sentence must be understood literally, following the erasure of the platonic-christian dualism that occurred in modern poetry: «Poetry itself is the Beyond [...] The word does not manifest transcendence; it is, in itself, transcendence» (ibid., 136-140; see also Aragon [1983]: 20)¹⁰. In sum, the Surrealist theory and practice demand a «historico-philosophical interpretation» which overcomes any consideration «immanent to aesthetic» and rejects concurrently their reduction to politics (Taubes [1996]: 135).

Indeed, the time in image space which Surrealism seeks «is no longer that of progress», says Benjamin (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 3, 1041). Its mistrust of the development of productive forces contrasts greatly with the historical optimism of dialectical materialism. The Surrealists, in Benjamin's view, are the sole representatives of the European intelligentsia to have actually understood the demands set by the revolution and to have set their watches to that end, although they do not always tell the same time as the Third International. Emmanuel Berl made a critical remark in this regard in the fragment of *Mort de la pensée bourgeoise* which is transcribed at the beginning of convolute a of the *Passagen-Werk*: «Since the Surrealists keep on confusing moral non-conformity and proletarian revolution, instead of following the train of the modern world, they seek to roll back to a historical moment in which this confusion was still possible, a political climate prior to the Congress of Tours, before, even, the development of Marxism, in the 20's, 30's and 40's» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, a1, 1, 852; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 698; Berl [1929]: 402). For Benjamin, this regressive atti-

¹⁰ Ferdinand Alquié, who gives on his part a humanistic interpretation of surrealism, reaches a similar conclusion: «Far from seeing in poetry the sign of the beyond, Aragon reduces the beyond to poetry» (Alquié [1977]: 29). On Taubes's reading, see Barck [2001]: 311-318.

tude, far from meaning a confusion, does not only explicate why the Surrealists refused to rally behind the Bolshevik program adopted at the 1920 Congress which led to the creation of the *Section française de l'Internationale communiste* (SFIC); it mainly indicates which forces must be integrated into the revolutionary struggle and not left at the mercy of fascism:

For, on the one hand, here there are elements – anthropological materialism, hostility towards progress – that are refractory to Marxism, while, on the other hand, speaks that willingness for Apocatastasis, the resolution (Entschluß) to gather up once again in revolutionary action and revolutionary thought precisely those elements of the “so soon” and the “so late” of the first beginning and the last disintegration. (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, a1, 1, 852; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 698)

The association established here between the mystical motif of *apokatástasis* or *restitutio in integrum* – present in the *Theologisch-politisches Fragment*, as well as in *Der Erzähler* (1936), where it is taken directly from Origen (Benjamin [1892-1940]: II, 1, 458; Benjamin [1935-1938]: 158)¹¹, and in convolute N of the *Passagen-Werk*, in which it serves to characterize the historical method (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 1, N1a,3, 573; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 459) – and the refractory elements to Marxism brings back the sources of surrealist revolution beyond the anarcho-communists, utopian and social-revolutionary currents that took part in the insurrection of the Paris Commune and vied with Marxism at the First International, Benjamin studied by in the convolutes a and k of the *Passagen-Werk* (see Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, 852-898, 949-956; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 698-739, 788-795). This genealogy not only refers to Louis Auguste Blanqui, Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Jacobins or Saint-Simonian clubs, but also to the fraternities that emerged and spread in France between

the Restoration and the Revolution of February 1848. In convolute P, entitled *Antropologischer Materialismus, Sektengeschichte*, Benjamin joins together about fifteen notes devoted to the study of Claire Demar's writings, the Fusionists, Evadians, Vesuvians and other lodges, integrated mostly by artisans and small traders, who preached palingenesis, the mystery of sexes, androgyny, the accomplishment of a true Catholicism and the realization on Earth of the «universal light» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, 971-981; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 516-526). It is the secularized mysticism of these sects that Benjamin claims as a factor of extreme importance for political praxis:

It is really necessary to the highest degree to capture, in the polemic dimension that belongs to it, the apotheosis of the organization and rationale that the Communist Party must tirelessly put to work in the face of feudal and hierarchical powers, and to realize that mystical elements, though by nature entirely different, also form part of the movement. It is certainly even more important not to confuse these elements belonging to corporality with religious elements. (Benjamin [1892-1940]: V, 2, a1, 2, 853; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 698-699)

In other terms, «to win the forces of *Rausch* for revolution» means to assimilate dialectically the experience of nihilism and secularized mysticism, into communist praxis. The “profane illumination” is not an artistic-literary substitute for the enlightenment of mysticism or speculative theology; it expresses a «willingness for Apocatastasis», a «corporeal innervation» of the collective and a moral exaltation bordering fanaticism for which the Nineteenth Century sects and esoteric fraternities were the repositories. This «anthropological, materialistic inspiration» works as a true «opium of the people», according to Marx's statement in *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* so quoted as misunderstanding: «Religious misery is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real misery and a *protest* against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people» (Marx [1843-

¹¹ For a recent in-deph study on Origenian concept of Apocatastasis and Benjamin's messianism, see Desideri [2016].

1844]: 378). Aragon plays precisely with this idea in *Le Paysan de Paris*, when he parodies Hegel's inaugural speech at the University of Berlin in 1818 (see Rubio [2003]: 58). In the middle of the conversation between the Human and the Spiritual faculties, the Imagination appears as «a tall and thin old man wearing a Habsburg style moustache, a long fur-lined frock coat and a busby» to present his new discovery (Aragon [1993]: 79-80). «This is not progress», says the Imagination, comparing himself with «coco-seller»; what he offers is «a drug coming from the borders of consciousness», the «philtre of the absolute», «the genie in a bottle, poetry in solid bar», «the machine to capsize the mind», «a new vice»: «Surrealism, the son of frenzy and shadow» (ibid., 81).

The space towards which the Imagination points out «with a translucent index», says Aragon, is a «small wooden stall where tickets are taken for the Modern Theater» (Aragon [1993]: 84), a withered place located at the bottom of the Passage de l'Opéra, to which Breton also refers in *Nadja* (Breton [1964]: 43-44), where plays in the style of the Grand Guignol were performed and where, over a century, different attractions had taken place: the Europorama of the Suhr brothers, the Gymnase Enfantin, the «panoramic and phantasmagoric evenings» of the Polirama National, the shows of «Russian sorcery» of the Théâtre Dicksonn, naughty reviews, comedies and operettas and a cinematograph (see Julien [1825]: 298; Nerval [1837]: 390; Lévy [1899]; Chaveau [1999]: 387; Walz [2000]: 20). The subtitle *Eine dialektische Feerie* of the initial version of the *Passagen-Werk* renders homage to this world, evoking a secondary theatrical form, «widely practiced on the stages of the Fair since at least 1780», whose plots and characters were based on the «repertoire of fairy tales» (Martin [2004]: 256). During the Revolution, especially under the Consulate and the Directory, the *féerie* was aesthetically consolidated mainly as a visual spectacle, consisting of a combination of *tableaux vivants*, songs, dance, mime and acrobatics. Bound to become one of the great genres of the Second Empire, it merged, towards the end of Nineteenth Century, with various dra-

matic forms, and gave its name to extravagant shows such as the *opéras féeries* by Jacques Offenbach, thaumaturgic performances by Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin or early movies by Georges Méliès.

The puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a water pipe in its mouth, sitting before a chessboard placed on a large table, which Benjamin describes in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, also belongs to that wonderworld. It was apparently motivated by Edgar Allan Poe's *Maelzel's chess player* (1836), translated into French by Baudelaire in *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses*, a book that Benjamin logged in his reading list (Benjamin [1892-1940]: VII, 1, 457). The automaton was constructed in 1769 by Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen and exhibited in Paris, Vienna and other European cities, before it was sold to the Bavarian engineer Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, who took it to London and the United States, where it gave rise to Poe's considerations on the enigma of its functioning. In his memoirs, French illusionist Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin said he had seen «the famous *chess player*» in 1844 at the home of a mechanic of Belville and told a long and fantastic story about its invention: Kempelen had built it in Saint Petersburg at the request of a certain Dr. Osloff, «known for his benevolent humanity», as a hiding place in order to conceal a Polish rebel, a chess master, who had lost both his legs when fighting against the Russian empire occupation troops (Robert-Houdin [1868]: 160-173). In 1926, writer and journalist Henry-Dupuy-Mazuel based on this legend wrote the novel *Le Joueur d'échecs*, which was adapted under the same title into two films in France: in 1927, the silent movie directed by Raymond Bernard and, in 1938, the popular version directed by Jean Dréville, in whose script the former Surrealist Roger Vitrac made a significant contribution by writing the dialogues¹².

In Benjamin's thesis, written according to

¹² Raymond Bernard (ed.), *Le joueur d'échecs*, screenplay by Raymond Bernard and Jean-José Frappa, La Société des Films Historiques, 1927; Jean Dréville (dir.), *Le joueur d'échecs*, screenplay by Albert Guyot, dialogues by Roger Vitrac, Doret and André Bernard Zimmer, Compagnie Française de Distribution Cinématographique, 1938.

Scholem and other witnesses under the shock of “the Nazi-Soviet Pact”, which destroyed «his faith in Marxism-Leninism» (Scholem [1983]: 64, Tiedeman [1983]: 139 n. 50), the automaton’s description seems to combine the image of the Polish resistance fighter and the portrait of Melzel’s assistant “*Schlumberger*”, who would assemble and disassemble the machine but would remain invisible during the performance, a medium-sized man with «an outstanding hump on the shoulders», Poe says in the original English, which Baudelaire translates into French: «*les épaules singulièrement voûtées*» (Poe [1975] 14: 163-164; Poe [1836]: 35). A «hunchbacked dwarf, who is a master at chess», is concealed inside the mechanism and guides the puppet’s hand by pulling strings. Benjamin imagines an equivalent of this device in philosophy: «The puppet named “historical materialism” must always win. It can easily be a match for anyone if it puts at its service the theology, which is known to be small and ugly today and in any case has to keep out of sight» (Benjamin [1892-1940]: I, 2, 693; Benjamin [1938-1940]: 389). In the *Second manifeste*, concerned about preserving the purity of the Surrealist movement, Breton quoted some paragraphs of the French translation of the Christian cabalist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim’s *De Occulta philosophia* (1533) to justify his motto: «I DEMAND THE DEEP, TRUE CONCEALMENT OF SURREALISM!» (Breton [1929]: 128; Agrippa [1533]: II, 3, 236). Benjamin had read Agrippa’s book in Latin in his youth (Benjamin [1910-1918]: 248, 55) and, when he concealed the threads of Surrealism in his own writings, he was consistent with the demand put forward by Breton.

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